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LEARNING TO LEAD: A Literary Approach

Abstract

‘Leading and Developing Public Service’ is an accredited Higher Education programme provided by the School of Health and Social Sciences aimed at those working in health, social care, community and public services. The acquisitions of skills and knowledge in leadership and management are frequently cited as the key to delivering the UK Government’s vision of quality services and suppose a relationship between ‘effective leadership’ and transforming services. How students engage with learning about their own leadership potential however, is a challenge to educators and organisations particularly in relation to distributory and participatory models seen to be particularly fitting for the public sector. Within this context leaders are constantly presented with moral and ethical choices within a rapidly changing and challenging environment. Our leadership module is designed to encourage students to confront fundamental moral challenges in their everyday work and to develop skills in moral analysis and judgement through an approach that sought to engage students with these concepts embodied within well known literary works. This paper shares our experiences of this pedagogic approach aimed to assist students come to terms with their own definition of moral leadership and the potential for translating this into action. Early evaluation demonstrates that students experienced deeper learning in relation to theoretical concepts and models of leadership as well as being able to safely engage with and experience the taking up of leadership and respective followership roles.

Key words: Public sector leadership, moral leadership, literary works, experiential learning, followership.

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1. Introduction

Public services in the UK have entered into a very challenging period. The global economic downturn has called for urgent attention to establishing new styles of leadership to overcome unprecedented financial pressures and deliver productivity and quality improvements (Hafford-Letchfield, 2010). Discourses of leadership and leadership development are a key feature of reform in relation to the challenges faced and the requisite skills needed by the workforce to address them (NSASC, undated; NLC, undated, NHS, 2010). Discourses focussing on leaders as ‘superheroes’ (Lees, 2010) have been replaced with those which focus on the ability to work across multi professional and sectoral boundaries (HMG, 2007). Leaders need to persuade others over the right course of action as opposed to a “cavalry charge” aligned to a single personal, institution or organisational solution. This ‘post-heroic’ model (Turnbull, 2011) involves multiple people taking up leadership roles both formally and informally. More importantly, leadership is to be shared by working collaboratively (Birney *et al*, 2010). Thus, shared and collaborative leadership involves distributing roles away from the top of an organisation to its many levels and situations, by facilitating new practices, processes and innovations through different relationships and which includes frontline practitioners and citizens themselves (Hafford-Letchfield *et al*, 2008).

More cynically, others (O’Reilly and Reed, 2010; Lawler and Bilson, 2010) assert that such ‘leaderism’ is merely a discursive term designed to complement a corresponding rise of managerialism. New Public Management (NPM) and governance in the UK has led to the “re-imaging” of public services through a relentless programme of reform (O’Reilly and Reed, 2010, p.903). Different facets of leadership include its association with system-wide

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transformational change where professionals perform the role of change agents in the manner that public services are provided and consumed. The idea that leadership can be taught and learned for practice, bypasses its essential connection with management. Leadership development programmes seek to include frontline professional staff, service users and patients in support of more distributory and participatory models (Hafford-Letchfield *et al*, 2008). O'Reilly and Reed (2010) highlight the contradictory tensions of this implied independence where leadership metaphors, for example, enable the morphing and change of its character which they then suggest, supplants managerialist ideologies through explicit use of the language of leadership and supposed belief in the importance of the relationships it entails (p.93). Leadership encompasses a social-co-ordinating role determined through the environment; in which direction giving, effort, commitment and followership benefit all of those involved.

These policy and workforce development imperatives in the UK public sector workforce, have given rise to an increase and spread of provision of leadership development programmes attempting to engage with a variety of pedagogic approaches to transform aspirations into reality (Grove *et al*, 2007; McAllen and MacRae, 2010; LGA, 2011). There is a growing body of theory about what constitutes 'leadership' in the sector (Lawler, 2007) and the contribution of different leadership styles to team development and empowerment (Boehm and Yoels, 2008). An empirical basis for these ideas however, remains limited, particularly on how leadership might be successfully taught or learnt. What is not lacking is the substantial critique that exists on the impact of managerialism and the marketisation of care services (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Harris, 2002). These document conditions of uncertainty, turbulence and issues of inequality and power in public services. Within the **Abstract submission number: 310103**

current climate therefore, unless leadership education strives towards a more transformational experience (Mezirow, 1981), its effects may readily dissipate leaving behind just fine rhetoric.

2. Learning to lead: what is needed from leadership education in the public sector?

The task of leadership is often expressed as being able to motivate people to achieve outcomes that benefit the individual, the team and the organisation and achieving a balance between these (Hafford-Letchfield *et al*, 2008). Evaluations of leadership development programmes suggests that the features supporting successful leadership development include; models that support distributed leadership such as the utilisation of networks; the use of action learning sets or communities fostered and supported for a sustained period of time (Grove *et al*, 2007; McAllen and MacRae, 2010; Gray *et al*, 2010). Potential leaders therefore need constructive opportunities to reflect on how they actually lead, facilitate and promote more effective engagement of those with a direct stake in such changes and how they might embed this in their day-to-day work. Programmes should support leaders to develop knowledge of how to effectively promote learning in their organisations and within the different partnerships involved (Gould and Baldwin, 2004). As public services often pick up the pieces when initiatives or systems fail, building resilience to stress alongside social networks is also crucial. The legitimacy of the local state in the UK is highly dependent on relationships with civil society, including informal networks with the community, patients, service users and minority groups as well as formal partnerships at both strategic and operational levels (Birney *et al*, 2010). Given the difficult history of recruitment and retention in some areas of the sector, employing and retaining the best talent depends equally

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on training and supporting the knowledge, skills and associated morale of aspirant leaders to reduce turnover.

3. Learning about aspects of moral leadership

The inclusion of personal and strong democratic elements within leadership education is essential to retain the values inherent in the public sector. Locke (1976), for example proposed four latent factors that underpin personal and work-related values. These include; the desire for clarity, harmony and justice; a desire for challenge, independence and responsibility; desires for work facilitation such as leadership, support and recognition and desires for warm and friendly social relations. These correspond with empirically derived factors of organisational climate and culture and associated with more person-centred approaches being promoted in public services. For example our capacity to make transformations or develop ways of knowing have affective, interpersonal and moral dimensions.

Some attempts have been made within the leadership literature to find ways of measuring these (Donoghue and Castle, 2009). Leadership theory places emphasis on the interaction between leaders and followers (Bass, 1990; Avolio *et al*, 1999) where an authentic approach to leading is cited as desirable and effective in achieving positive and enduring outcomes in organizations (George and Sims, 2007). Authentic leaders are those who know and act upon their true values, beliefs, and strengths, while helping others to do the same. Paying attention to employees' well-being at different levels shows positive impact on follower performance (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Likewise, the role that leaders play in follower engagement at work

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suggests that engagement is best enhanced when employees feel they are supported, recognized, and developed by their managers (Harter *et al.*, 2002).

All these perspectives were considered in our approach to teaching leadership when designing a new programme and taking a creative approach to addressing students learning and development needs. Our curriculum involved developing collaboration and collectivist approaches by promoting the leadership roles taken by users and other professionals during the learning and development process. Arts based approaches, for example, have been found to be particularly useful in achieving these (Hafford-Letchfield *et al.*, 2008).

4. Background to the ‘Leadership in public and community services’ module

‘Leading and developing public and community services’ is an accredited Higher Education programme provided by the School of Health and Social Sciences aimed at those working in health, social care, community and public services. Its foundation module; ‘Leading public and community services’ (the focus of this paper), runs twice per academic year, with approximately 25 registered students per module (n=50). Students come from a range of different professional backgrounds such as social work, nursing, midwifery, allied health and mental health. The module incorporates a systemic approach to leadership building using teaching methods and interactive workshops which draw on concepts such as positioning theory (Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999) the use of systemic questioning (Tomm, 1985) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperider, 1998). Alongside the literature project discussed here, these were used to foster conditions which maximise empowerment in learning about leadership and understanding of roles and relationships within the workplace from a social constructionist paradigm.

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5. The learning through literature project

Inspired by work done by Sucher (2007) at the Harvard Business School, we adopted an experiential approach to facilitate students in finding their own workable definition of moral leadership. This sought to engage students with concepts embodied within well-known literary works and encourage them to confront fundamental moral challenges in their everyday work using skills in moral analysis and judgement. Some of the hardest leadership decisions are those with moral or ethical stakes. Drawing on the creative arts allowed students to develop emotional reactions to well-established characters within chosen literature works who are facing difficult decisions. Adapting a diverse range of works can also prompt significant depth of discussion through experiential and deeper learning (Kolb, 1984). By reflecting on beliefs and values about leadership through the innovative use of narratives from the literature sources given to students, live and interesting case studies were provided. Students were required to develop a final end presentation. This included a synopsis of the character narrative alongside interrogation of their professional leadership frameworks to consider what this meant in practice. Providing opportunities for student self-directed and supported learning created a space for students to reflect on how to develop more distributive leadership styles and effective teamwork within a safe and supported process. Using the case studies in the literary works given, provided a potential metaphorical frame of reference from which to address the above learning needs. This departed from more habitual schemas for describing and thinking about the different attributes of leading change, leading teams and engaging with ethical and moral issues along the way. Such approaches according to Barrett and Cooperrider (1990) have the potential to:

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“see anew, to facilitate the learning of new knowledge, to create new scenarios of future action, and to overcome areas of rigidity” (p.224).

Literature in its different forms can offer relevant insights into the diversity of human behaviour, personality and relationships, emotions and feelings, life events, culture and environment and communication, to mention but a few (Simmons and Hicks, 2006). Critical theory, critical reflection and personal accountability are all cited as key aspects of professional identity and essential to the facilitation of professional learning and development (Watson, 2008). According to Hafford-Letchfield and Bourne (2011), they also call for the identification and acquisition of concrete tools that potential leaders can use to purposively promote their own learning and foster a learning climate.

6. The three literary works

From the outset, students were allocated to one of three experiential learning groups and invited to appoint a team leader and create a name for their group. Each group is given a well known literary work (see *Table 1* below), two of which are available in film mode.

Table 1: Synopsis of well known literary works

Group A Case Study Death of a Salesman Arthur Miller (1949)	Group B Case Study Things Fall Apart Chinua Achebe (1958)	Group C Case Study The Last Tycoon F. Scott Fitzgerald (1941)
The play's protagonist Willy Loman is obsessed with the question of greatness, and his downfall arises directly from his continued misconception of himself, late in life, as someone capable of greatness, as well as a high level of conviction that greatness stems directly from personal charisma or popularity.	The novel depicts the life of Okonkwo, a leader and local wrestling champion in Umuofia, one of a fictional group of nine villages in Nigeria, inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group. In addition it focuses on his three wives, his children, and the influences of British colonialism and Christian missionaries on his traditional Igbo community during the late nineteenth century.	The novel was inspired by the life of film producer Irving Thalberg, on whom protagonist Monroe Stahr is based. The story follows Stahr's rise to power in Hollywood, and his conflicts with rival Pat Brady, a character based on studio head Louis B. Mayer

Students were asked to read/ watch the work, and consider the narrative through reference to leadership theories taught on the module. They considered how far the characters leadership style and qualities measured up to their chosen public sector leadership framework (students referred to in this paper utilised the National Health Service Leadership Framework (www.nhsleadershipqualities.nhs.uk/). Groups were given six weeks in which to develop a peer presentation for other students. This self-directed group work took place outside the classroom and involved leading and following a process for managing each individual's input in the group. This included agreeing the communication strategy, assessing each person's

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contribution, identifying resources and timescales. They were introduced to Blanchard's (1983) *Perform Assessment and Action framework* (see Table 2 below) completed at the end of the task and adapted as a tool for assessing the potential learning from followers. This tool highlights group process as key to successful leadership and underlines the importance of people, process and outcome. It proved a usual frame of reference for groups undertaking and staying on the primary task.

Table 2 – PERFORM, action and assessment framework (after Blanchard, 1983)

Dimension	Description	Score 1-10	What action can I take to improve performance?
Purpose	My team has strength and unity of purpose.		
Empowerment	Team members are comfortable taking charge of situations.		
Relationships & Communication	We have effective relationships and open communications both inside and outside the team.		
Flexibility	People adapt to change at short notice. They are flexible with their time and deeds.		
Optimal productivity	We have no slackers and nobody working them self to death. No presenteeism.		
Recognition	Team members recognise one another's contribution and the help of others.		
Morale	My team has high morale maintained by achieving breakthroughs and having a shared purpose.		

Experiential learning is a well established in adult education theory (Kolb, 1984). Learning by ‘doing’ offers an opportunity to take up both ‘leadership’ and ‘followership’ roles during the module by integrating theoretical components of the course into a final presentation. We assert that the taking up of these roles in a live context ignited interest and generated both individual and small group discovery. Active participation and reflection yielded interesting outcomes for students and tutors. Kolb (1984) for example refers to the immediate concrete experiences of learners that allow reflection on new experience from different perspectives. From these reflective observations, engagement is possible in abstract conceptualisation, creating generalisations or principles that integrate observations into sound theories. Learners then use these generalisations or theories as guides to further action. Active experimentation is said to allow the testing of the learning in new and more complex situations. The result is another concrete experience, but this time at a more complex level.

7. Evaluation of the students’ experience

The remainder of this paper discusses the findings from the evaluations of the ‘learning through literature & film’ project in its first year. We do not make any grand claims given our relatively small sample size. There are a number of challenges in evidencing correlation between learners’ reactions to the pedagogic methods used in relation to being able to identify true measures of changed leadership behaviours. Kirkpatrick’s four stage model (1983) of evaluating training helped in conceptualising outcomes of learning at different levels:

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- Level one: student reactions on what they thought and felt about the learning
- Level two: student learning in terms of their perceived increase in knowledge or capability
- Level three: the extent of behaviour and capability improvement, implementation and application reported or observed
- Level four: the outcomes for the students' organisational environment that demonstrates results from their changed performance.

Our evaluation focused on levels one and two which does not address to what extent learning has been applied. At the end of this paper we reflect on how a more formally designed outcome evaluation might embed the project in learning partnerships with sponsoring organisations, where future performance of the attainment of 'softer skills' might be assessed. Evaluation data was obtained from the students own reported self-evaluation of learning through completion of a post presentation evaluation feedback proforma (n=38). This asked their views about the project usefulness, interests and challenges. We also utilised outcomes from the PERFORM assessment. This data is supported by some evaluative commentary on the final group presentations (n=6) and tutors own reflective observations (n=2).

8. Moving beyond the characters in the literature: evidence of connection to professional practice contexts

Of the 38 students who completed evaluation forms, 22 rated the experience as 'really useful' and 15 as 'useful'. A key issue highlighted was the unique opportunity to work with others, particularly across professional disciplines. Most students (n=26) specifically commented on

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different advantages of working in a group which included diverse perspectives and on the tensions involved in co-ordinating, agreeing deadlines and working collaboratively to manage this:

“Exploring everyone’s individualness and creativeness”

“The involvement as a group; it allowed us to open up and know our own potential”

One person found it ‘not so useful’ and referred to the pressure of finding time to meet up and another commented on *“dealing with the procrastination from others”*.

Anxiety and confusion appeared as key characteristics during the forming of the group’s when leadership and other roles were negotiated. One student noted that the *“tutors should select the leader”*. However, the neutral and non-statutory topic of the case studies proved powerful in bringing together students from different professional backgrounds; the study of leadership being their common currency.

A striking feature of the student feedback was the potential for direct application of leadership knowledge and skills. 10 students specifically referred to how this had helped them make sense of their own role in the workplace and to recognise their own leadership styles.

“It motivated me and made me assess my leadership style in the workplace!”

Race (2005) details that in many teaching-learning contexts, not least lectures and small-group sessions, a productive method of learning is through the use of questioning. When

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learners are working out what questions to ask, they are exploring their own need to learn at the time, and at the same time often working on what they want to find out.

“Implement and utilise theory to something real that could be related to work” (student evaluation).

Receiving answers to their own questions is of course learning through feedback as is hearing answers to other people’s questions. Ideally, all of these processes should help them to make sense or digest the topics which are the basis of the questions.

A number of salient lessons emerged. Firstly, the groups that took their time in agreeing and negotiating the leadership roles arrived with the stronger and more comprehensive presentations. Feedback here included students who in their ordinary working environment were in subordinate roles and wanted the opportunity to test their leadership capacity. This appeared to occasion more active and participatory followership and clear evidence of distributed leadership within the group. Followers here, citing the sub task of “getting behind” their leader due to clarity of expectations and a clearly expressed sub goal of the leadership (PERFORM feedback) and *“develop(ing) something achievable”* (student evaluation). This could be seen in direct contrast to some groups who managed the initial anxiety very quickly by appointing the perceived highest ranking member of the group. This was associated with less participatory followership. The leaders’ feedback here cited less encouraging performance and delivery by various group members. This was also reflected in the PERFORM scores and proved a useful classroom discussion point to get a further exposition of the nature between leadership and followership.

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Over the course of two modules, six comprehensive presentations emerged (two for each respective case study). All groups consolidated their learning about traditional leadership theories by measuring themselves and the case studies against the backdrop of, for example, Bryman's (1996) chronological leadership theory development. This was illustrated by excerpts from the student group presentations. The *trait approach* (up to the 1930s) i.e. leaders are born rather than made, nature is more important than nurture:

"Willy (Loman) was very confident at home with his wife, overpowering with his sons and always felt a worthy businessman with self confidence!" (Presentation).

The *style approach* (late 1940's to the late 1960's) where the behaviour of the leaders is important was illustrated in another presentation;

"Mr Stahr understands the political climate in which he worked, thus he was able to use it to the company's advantage and his personal advantage" (presentation).

The *contingency approach* (late 1960's to early 1980's) which refers to situational factors as being most important were analysed thus in another presentation:

"Okonkwo's abilities as a leader were very much shaped by his people's culture, tradition and beliefs. Although he possessed some of the traits of a good leader, driven to be a true leader for people of his clan, he was unable to control his fears and emotions in relation to the change occurring around him. In his attempt to resist and prevent this change, he became disillusioned and discouraged, lost the will to live and took his own life"

And finally, the *new leadership approach* (early 1980's onwards) built upon hybrid theories of leadership encompassing trait, style, situation, and contingency and systemic thinking:

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“Munroe was able to transcend his own interest beyond being a leader...he had elements of charisma and facilitated intellectual stimulation by encouraging innovation and creativity among followers” (presentation).

Moreover, groups who made use of the NHS Leadership Qualities Framework (NHS, 2005) directly measured both the protagonists and themselves against the comprised fifteen leadership qualities arranged in three clusters such as Personal Qualities, Setting Direction and Delivering the Service. Each quality is broken down into a number of levels which help to identify the key characteristics, attitudes and behaviours required of effective leaders at any level of the service.

“Linking the character (in the novel) to the framework given because you had to see it from a different perspective in order to place it in the context of the framework” (student evaluation)

Grint (2005) described leadership as ‘an essentially contested concept’ with multiple interpretations being both logically possible and likely. He contends, however, that how we define what leadership is can influence how leaders are selected and advanced in organisations. Exploring these differences has practical implications for how effective organisations are. Leadership can be said to be a function of the relationship between leaders and followers, rather than simply focused on the person as leader. Leaders are ‘hybrid’ systems, comprising many different facets to facilitate their actions. These different concepts became more evident to students studying leadership and were evidenced in their presentations, tutor observations and feedback from peers. Moreover keywords from the student evaluations reflected their enjoyment of the experience (e.g. “enjoyable”, “excellent”, “completely unexpected”, “creative”, “eye-opening”). The ‘learning to lead’ project therefore

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enabled us to demonstrate that leadership can be learned using experiential approaches. Furthermore, the ethical dimension of leadership was best judged by the subjective opinion of followers as well as the outcomes and the final presentations produced. Not all valued this approach as one student commented that it was too stressful *“for some piece of work that was not going to be evaluated”*.

By utilising the literature in small group contexts with appointed leaders and followers and a clear primary task, students are taken much closer to real life experiences, in circumstances more powerful than didactic learning. Students engaged in the literature through active discussion and rigorous debate. This fostered a culture where students could think about and articulate their own moral positions and make judgments about the characters and their actions. Further, the exposition of diverse arguments and interpretations underpinned an approach that permitted students to safely challenge and reshape their own views. This process of analysis, interpretation, judgment and further debate constituted a firm platform to develop skills in moral reasoning and an understanding of their own moral range.

“Enriching and very resourceful, a different dimension of leadership analysis” (student evaluation)

9. Discussion and implications for leadership education and practice

Lewin (1951) highlighted that feeling emotions about concepts and translating these into action were key to substantive learning. These elements need not be distinctive and can be, and often are, integrated. Making use of literature in this project proved to be a particularly powerful medium as it gave students a unique inside view of characters in leadership roles. In

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their host working environments, students have fewer opportunities to work alongside senior leaders of their organisations and seldom know what their respective leaders are thinking and feeling. This style of learning allowed students a glimpse of leadership by sharing the experience.

Kolb (1984) defines learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This drives home several critical aspects of the learning process from the experiential perspective. First is the emphasis on the process of adaptation and learning as opposed to content or outcomes. Second is that knowledge is a transformational process being continuously created and recreated, not an independent entity to be acquired or transmitted. Third, learning transforms experience in both its objective and subjective forms. These ideas underpin arguments about the importance of ‘engaging leadership’ (Alimo-Metcalfe *et al.*, 2008) by drawing on research into leadership styles to emphasise the role of leaders in maximising the potential of others. The innovative use of literature in this context was extraordinarily powerful as it represented a novel way for students to perceive information. Students were able to see protagonists characters tested and influenced. In some stories, literature and life come together to facilitate the process of critical reflection. The characters came across as real people and broadened the view of leadership by demonstrating leaders in a spectrum of circumstances. Students were then able to directly compare how this fitted with their own experience. Looking closely at characters confronted students with challenging questions about the individuals in the narratives and significantly, with questions about themselves. Moreover, the small group work with the clear primary task facilitates the types of forum and discussions which enhanced capacity for complexity. The process of analysis, interpretation, judgement and debate, appeared to assist students in honing skills in

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moral reasoning and their understanding of their own moral priorities. This integrative approach supports students to be able to actively do something with their new emerging knowledge and moving towards a moral domain in the context of their aspirant leadership framework. In addition, the experiential and reflective aspects of the learning experience helped to create social bonds between the different professionals involved.

10. Conclusions

Current literature on leadership in public services reflects has to engage with deeply complex social problems that sit across and between governmental departments and institutions. These ‘wicked’ issues require leaders to facilitate innovative responses rather than rolling out known processes (Grint et al., 2005). Leadership development has to occur within a paradigm which relates directly to the professional and sector expectations (Hafford-Letchfield and Bourne, 2011). This is not just concerned with individual leadership practice, such as increased self awareness and skills but should grapple with wider benefits associated with the transformation agenda (HMG, 2007) currently imperative in the UK public sector. This means engaging with improved communication between teams, colleagues and the public and by enacting change to make a positive difference.

Our small example grappled with some of the learning and teaching challenges in how to prepare professionals for leadership roles in a way that has a direct impact on everyday professional practice. There were of course a number of limitations. Firstly, the need to utilise more diverse case studies, to reflect multiple social divisions and differences in leadership such as around ethnicity, gender, disability and sexuality which may open up more space for contestation within leadership theory and practice (Hafford-Letchfield, 2011).

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Secondly Kirkpatrick's model (1983) is a useful methodological scaffold for developing further action research into how such pedagogic interventions have influenced changed and future leadership performance and impact.

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